DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 145 447 CS 203 659

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TITLE The Basics: Random Reflections on a Movement.
PUB DATE Nov 77
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Virginia Council of Teachers of English (Richmond, November 4-5, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; *Basic Skills; *Citizen Participation; Educational Change; Educational Environment; Educational Policy; *Educational Quality; *National Competency Tests; National Norms; Public Education; *Public Opinion; Standardized Tests
IDENTIFIERS *Back to Basics

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the implications of the "back-to-basics" educational movement, expressing doubts about the advisability of standardized tests and the overall popularity of the movement. It states that learning reading and writing skills depends on the proper educational environment, and suggests that the use of minimum-competency requirements at all educational levels may only serve to distinguish students by their "test-taking" skills. As to the popularity of the "back-to-basics" movement, the paper provides public opinion polls indicating that parents with children in schools express confidence in public education systems and that the most severe critics of public education are those persons without children in public schools, indicating that public schools have suffered a decade of "bad press." The paper concludes by proposing that teachers in the humanities solicit active participation in public education by all citizens. (RL)

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THE BASICS:

RANDOM REFLECTIONS ON A MOVEMENT

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Let me concede at the outset that I have no argument with those who want students to reason clearly, speak intelligently (and intelligibly), write lucidly, be creative, and possess values that will enhance not only their own lives but the lives of others. No thoughtful teacher or parent could quarrel with such ends. Certainly I wish them for my own children, and as a teacher, I wish them for the children of others. But neither as a parent nor as a teacher am I sure how best to help students accomplish these laudable goals, for the degree of their attainment is dependent on youngsters' genetic inheritance; on the quality of public education available to them; on the human and material resources of their homes and neighborhoods; on the priorities and tone of the society; and finally, on their desire to learn. In short, neither as parent nor as teacher am I in control of all the conditions that might in time result in every citizen being rational, imaginative, inquisitive, and moral. To the degree I am in control, I intend to continue trying to create situations whereby and wherein young people can most effectively learn.

Ironically, those ostensibly allied with me in this endeavor are not. Though they trumpet the importance of learning, most proponents of the back-to-the-basics movement seem to want to establish in the schools an environment that, if it will not impede learning, will impede any consequential learning. Before I elaborate on this assertion, I should first review what various meanings appear to be implied by the words basics and back to, for those doing the sloganeering are not always explicit about what they would have us return to.

After a month-long study involving reading widely in newspapers and periodicals; corresponding with twelve and telephoning an additional eight knowledgeable educators, reporters, and researchers; and personally interviewing George Weber of the Council for Basic Education and Jerry Floyd and Katherine Mueller of the National School Boards Association, Ben Brodinsky, former editor-in-chief for Croft Educational Services, presented in Phi Delta Kappan

(March 1977) a composite of the demands made at various times and in different places by advocates of back-to-basics:

1. Emphasis [is to be] on reading, writing, and arithmetic in the elementary grades. Most of the school day is to be devoted to these skills. Phonics is the method advocated for reading instruction.
2. In the secondary grades, most of the day is to be devoted to English, science, math, and history, taught from "clean" textbooks, free of notions that violate traditional family and national values.
3. At all levels, the teacher is to take a dominant role, with "no nonsense about pupil-directed activities."
4. Methodology is to include drill, recitation, daily homework, and frequent testing.
5. Report cards are to carry traditional marks . . . or numerical values . . . issued at frequent intervals.
6. Discipline is to be strict, with corporal punishment an accepted method of control. Dress codes should regulate student apparel and hair styles.
7. Promotion from grades and graduation from high school are to be permitted only after mastery of skills and knowledge has been demonstrated through tests. Social promotion and graduation on the basis of time spent in courses are out.
8. Eliminate the frills. The National Review . . . put it this way: "Clay modeling, weaving, doll construction, flute practice, vollyball, sex education, laments about racism, and other weighty matters should take place on private time."

9. Eliminate electives and increase the number of required courses.

10. Ban innovations . . . ! New math, new science, linguistics, instruction by electronic gadgets, emphasis on concepts instead of facts--all must go.

11. Eliminate the schools' "social services"--they take time away from the basic curriculum. "Social services" may include sex education, driver education, guidance, drug education, and physical education.

12. Put patriotism back in the schools. . . . And [love] for God.

About this bill of particulars, Mr. Brodinsky comments: "Such a list, read as a totality, would cheer only the most rabid protagonists of back-to-basics. It chills even the most conservative of educators. It brings out the defensive mechanisms in most professionals." (pg. 522)

And well it should, for the list reveals numerous assumptions, emphases, and omissions that need more careful examination than partisans of the basics have given them. Foremost is the assumption that those who adversely criticize public education speak for the citizenry at large, an assumption that, at least until recently, could not be supported by evidence at hand. After analyzing the annual Gallup Poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools for the eight-year period 1969-76, Vernon Smith observed in What People Think About Their Schools: Gallup's Findings (Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, Bloomington, Indiana: 1977):

> . . . The most striking feature of the polls is the deep and continuing confidence of the public in the schools. . . . The picture from the eight polls is of citizens who have confidence in their schools, who place the blame for children's poor experiences in school and for declining test scores on other agencies, and who wish to share the responsibility for solving the schools' major problems. (pg. 7)

Dr. Smith found evidence of public support to be bountiful throughout the polls. In 1973, 61 percent of all respondents and 69 percent of public school parents felt education was better than it was when they were in school; in that same year, 82 percent of parents thought their children were learning the things they should be learning in school. In 1972, when asked whether blame for the poor scholastic performance of some children should be placed on the children, on the children's home life, on the school, or on the teachers, 57 percent of the public placed responsibility on the children's home life, 14 percent on the children, 12 percent on teachers, and 6 percent on schools. Eleven percent had no opinion. When asked in 1976 to cite causes (respondents could name more than one) for the decline in national test scores, the public responded as follows: 65 percent--parents are providing less attention, concern, and supervision; 52 percent--students aren't motivated to do well; 49 percent--students view television too much; 49 percent--the society is too permissive; 39 percent--teachers are giving less attention to students; 16 percent--it's easier to get into college now; 16 percent--the tests aren't reliable. As late as 1976, 42 percent of the public rated the schools A or B in quality, whereas only 16 percent rated them D or F.

But the 1976 and 1977 polls contain signs of waning public confidence, the inevitable result, I believe, of a decade of a poor press having been given the schools, of almost endless reports of score declines and of testimonials to the failure of students to read, write, or speak fluently. In both years the public continued to give solid support to teachers--citizens cited the curriculum and teachers most frequently when asked in what ways their local public schools were particularly good; 74 percent in 1976 opposed cutting teachers' salaries as a means of reducing school costs, and 70 percent opposed increasing class sizes. Nevertheless, those polled had clear misgivings about educational standards: 51 percent believed in 1976 that educational quality would be most improved if more attention were given to basic skills; of those

familiar with the term "back-to-basics," 83 percent in 1977 favored the movement; and 65 percent of all respondents in 1976 believed high school students in the United States should be required to pass a standard nationwide examination before receiving a high schcol diploma. The latter figure appears oddly reactionary when one discovers that those surveyed cited learning to think for oneself as the single most important quality in the overall development of a child.

Public support for a national test appeared not so odd, however, to those who have been monitoring educational legislation at both state and national levels. By April 1977, 8 state legislatures and 9 state boards of education had established state programs of minimal competency testing for high school graduation and grade-to-grade promotion, while an additional 15 states had introduced 24 bills related to the topic. On April 5, Democratic Congressman Ronald M. Mottl of the 23rd district in Ohio introduced H.R. 6088, which would establish a 15-member national commission on basic education to be appointed by the president. The commission would be responsible for establishing basic standards of educational proficiency in reading, writing, and mathematics. In its initial form, the bill would have required states to establish standards conforming to those of the commission and to administer a proficiency examination, which students would have had to pass before being graduated from secondary school. States refusing to comply with the provisions of the bill would have been deprived federal funds provided by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Hearings held on September 13 and 14 led Representative Mottl to decide to rewrite the bill, making testing voluntary and expanding it to lower grades. The new bill will follow Adm. Hyman Rickover's suggestion that a nationally prominent panel develop national scholastic standards consisting of specific minimum competency requirements for 2nd through 12th grade.

In mid-July a senate subcommittee on education, chaired by Senator Claiborne Pell (Dem., Rhode Island), held hearings on the "quality of [American] education." At the session a two-hour debate on national testing took place, with Admiral Rickover not only advocating the establishment of national standardized tests for various grade levels but claiming that high school diplomas have been so "cheapened" that many are now a "fraud." He condemned teachers' unions for preferring "the present system in which it is impossible to pinpoint responsibility." Mary Berry, former chancellor at the University of Colorado and current assistant secretary for education in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, raised a number of objections to a federally mandated national testing program. She pointed out (1) that citizens differ on what "quality" education is; (2) that since education is the responsibility of the states and local governments, the federal government should not attempt to impose standards; (3) that test results do not often yield helpful information to educators; (4) that it is doubtful that national tests would inspire students to work harder. But under questioning from Chairman Pell, who supported Admiral Rickover's proposal, Dr. Berry said "voluntary" national tests in reading, writing, and mathematics at various grade levels might have merit. She indicated she would ask the National Institute of Education (NIE) to devise the tests. However, in written response to questions about standardized testing posed by the Senate Human Resources Committee, Dr. Patricia Graham, the new director of NIE, said in early August that while it would be relatively simple to develop a national test that would "discriminate among children and . . . provide at least a rough indication of what children have learned," an effective, equitable test for national standards for reading, writing, and math at various grade levels would be "extremely hard to envision." Dr. Graham predicted that schools which think their students are doing better than the standard norm would use a voluntary national test, while other schools

would avoid it. She also indicated skepticism about bias-free tests, considering "the current state of the art of testing" and the low expectations some schools hold for students from "low-income and various cultural backgrounds."

This is not the occasion for me to rail at length against the deficiencies of standardized tests. I have said elsewhere ["The Vice/Vise of Standardized Testing. . ." ; English Journal, October, 1976] that norm-referenced tests are perforce reactionary instruments, incapable because of their norming processes of incorporating information that exists on the cutting edge of knowledge; that they do not at present assess speaking skill and effectiveness, reading interests, listening skills, understanding and appreciation of non-print media, development of values through the study of literature, or ability to produce effective writing, rather than to analyze the writing proficiency of others. Further, beyond items on usage or spelling, the tests rarely assess students' knowledge of such branches of language study as philology, linguistics, semantics, stylistics, lexicography, and phonology.

In regard to minimum competency tests, teachers of English should be less concerned about the emphasis given to instrumental uses of literacy than they should be ~~to~~ about the total absence of attention given to literature, an invaluable and inexhaustible resource for the education of students' imaginations. Not only can literature help young people vicariously inhabit lives and places different from their own, it can enrich their days with values they might not otherwise know or possess. As Fred Heckinger observed in the New York Times (November 9, 1976):

> . . . A program stripped to the basics usually does not provide much real education, even in the basics. If reading and writing are to have strong appeal, children must be interested in them as tools with which to tackle a world that seems interesting to them.

> Bare literacy, without the development and enjoyment of those other skills--in music, the arts, an understanding of a variety of people and cultures--offers little incentive to put the basic skills to work.

And tests, standardized or criterion referenced, that measure competency only by the superficial criterion of correctness invite puerile thinking and unimaginative, sterile writing from those being tested. A "performance indicator of writing competency" that recently crossed my desk read as follows:

> The student will write a legible autobiographical paragraph of 100 or more words with no errors in spelling, capitalization, or punctuation. Reference materials will be available to students.

While I value correctness, I value more highly the sensitivity, compassion, and integrity of individuals, including professional writers, many of whom would likely fail such a narrow indicator of competency.

When educators ask whether research justifies a return to the basics and the testing programs they have spawned, whether the schools and the society are indeed suffering a crisis in literacy, they find little empirical evidence to support the movement. A few years ago, Jaap Tuinman, Michael Rowls, and Roger Farr attempted to determine whether reading competency had declined over a length of time. After reviewing studies spanning a 102-year period, they concluded in Reading Achievement in the United States: Then and Now (The Reading Program Center and the Institute for Child Study, Indiana University, August, 1974):

> . . . First, that there is no reason for en masse pessimism; second, that the gradual improvement in reading competency over the four decades prior to 1965 may have lessened or halted; and finally, [that] over the last ten years there may have been a very slight

> decline in reading achievement. Of all our hesitant interpretations, we feel least certain about the last one. We are convinced that anyone who says that he knows that literacy is decreasing is ignoring the data. Such a person is at best unscholarly and at worst dishonest.

In a study of elementary and secondary textbooks conducted for the SAT Score Decline panel, Jeanne Chall concluded that their reading levels, as measured by the Dale-Chall Formula, had declined. Secondary students, according to Dr. Chall, at present seldom read textbook passages that exceed tenth-grade level of difficulty; yet they are confronted on the SAT with reading passages that range in level of difficulty from the eleventh- to the fifteenth-grade. In another study conducted for the SAT Score Decline panel, the reading performance of students who participated in the 1960 Project Talent Study was compared to that of students who participated in the 1972 National Longitudinal Study. The researchers found that over the 12-year period, a moderate but absolute decline in reading performance had occurred. These studies notwithstanding, the panel attributed two-thirds to three-fourths of the decline in SAT scores from 1963 to 1970 to a new pool of students taking the test--students from low socioeconomic backgrounds--rather than to any lowering of academic standards in the schools. The decline from 1970 to the present the panel attributed to a host of causes: television viewing; single parent households; national traumas such as student uprisings, political assassinations, Viet Nam, and Watergate; and a diminution in the quality of reading and writing expected of students. The panel frankly confessed that these attributions were speculative and unsupported by what psychometricians term "hard data." Further, panel members dissociated themselves from any movement to reduce curricular offerings to any simplistic core called "basics."

One concerned about literacy in the society needs to be chary not to confuse individuals' performance on any test of reading or writing, including the SAT, with their commitment to reading and writing as pleasurable if not always monetarily profitable activities, ones they wish to pursue throughout their lives. For that matter, one should not confuse individuals' performance on tests of reading or writing with their ability to read and to write. In "Notes on Some of the Problems with Standardized Achievement Tests," an unpublished report for a meeting of the Carnegie Corporation Board of Trustees (December 16, 1976), Fritz Mosher, a member of the Carnegie staff, noted:

> The way most of the tests are designed makes it likely that while scores on them may be influenced by the specific skills and knowledge they purport to measure, they are also heavily weighted by other skills and aptitudes (including "test taking" skills) so that at best they may really measure correlates of the specific skills the schools are trying to teach. . . . Because of limitations of format, imposed in part by the need to have tests which are easily administered and scored, the tests may not be able to measure crucial aspects of learning. Most of the tests involve multiple choice questions. With such questions it is hard to assess a child's ability to <u>produce</u> a response as opposed to choosing among a small set of alternatives already produced for him or her. This is most obviously a problem in the case of writing.

Even when students are asked to produce a piece of writing for a test, they recognize that the conditions are false, that they are being asked to write on a topic not of their own choosing to an audience unknown to them within a time period that does not permit prewriting or revising. Clearly ignored are

most critical components of what we teachers of English call "the writing process."

Failure to take into account the wishes, the aspirations, the commitments of the learner is a fundamental weakness not alone of writing tests: it is a weakness indiginous to the back-to-the-basics movement. Those of us who profess to teach English know that real communication occurs only when people care about the messages they produce or receive, that is, when they use language in genuine situations for significant purposes. On this point, George H. Douglas of the University of Illinois recently wrote in the Educational Record (Vol. 57, No. 3):

> . . . Desire to read is not identical with the desire to satisfy the teacher's or society's demands. In fact, the desire to read is just the opposite. The only real reading is that which comes out of one's own drives and interests. Millions of college students read strenuously every day, but clearly the vast majority also don't read anything at all. What they are doing is fulfilling requirements, satisfying the demands . . . put upon them. We must be clear that they are not really reading, but are mechanically going through the chore of reading. . . It is better to read one movie magazine or hot rod magazine with relish and personal intensity than it is to read the whole of Dr. Sasparilla's textbook in economics to fulfill a requirement.

Dr. Douglas later comments about writing:

> . . . Like reading, writing may be taught--up to a point. The rudimentary skills may be drummed in by teachers on all educational levels, but the reason one hears the

> persistent complaint that students of supposedly high sophistication and intelligence can't write is that good writing requires a degree of force and will. One must want to write: one must want to reach out to another person. If writing is only a chore, then the results will always be disappointing.

To say that no one can teach anyone anything may be truistic, but it is none the less true: all teachers or parents can do is to try to provide environments that will stimulate young people to elect to learn. I can't help believing that educational environments that emphasize testing, that discount learners' self-determined motivations, and that disregard the arts and the humanities are oppressive environments, unsuitable not only to students but, in time, to a complex society, many of whose grave problems these same students will inherit and need to resolve.

Students are not alone, however, in having their wishes and aspirations ignored by those who champion a return to the basics. Teachers are invisible in the movement, their claims to knowledge about either their subjects or their students unattended. In fact, even their right to citizenry appears suspect. In "American Education: Its Failure and Its Future" (Phi Delta Kappan, March 1977), James K. Wellington, a member of a school board in Arizona and a strong believer in basics, writes:

> The schools belong to taxpayers, citizens, parents, voters. So do the students. They do not belong to school boards, administrators, staff, or faculty.

I want to proclaim here and now that I am a taxpayer, a citizen, a parent, and a voter. I am also a teacher and a person more knowledgeable about my field (and I would warrant, about students) than Mr. Wellington.

Those like him who would accord dedicated faculty no voice in a curricular movement affecting their professional lives must bear considerable responsi-

bility for practicing teachers' exceptionally low morale. When the National Education Association (NEA) surveyed its membership last year, it found the average teacher to be 33 years old, compared to 41 in 1961. The percentage of teachers with 20 years or more of experience had declined from 21.4 percent in 1966 to 14.1 percent in 1976. Only 60 percent of the respondents said they planned to remain teachers until retirement, while 62 percent were not sure they would choose a teaching career if they had it to do over again. Terry Herndon, executive director of NEA, ascribes the drop in the average age of teachers not to new teachers having been hired, but to older teachers having left the profession "in droves." (Education U.S.A., July 11, 1977)

As I have already made clear, minimum competency testing programs serve as handmaidens to the back-to-basics movement. The implications of such programs are profound. Allow me to pose quickly a number of questions for which advocates of the programs have not furnished answers, questions that will touch on issues beyond those I have already discussed:

1. Will minimum competency testing programs create educational conformity at the expense of ethnic pluralism in the curriculum?
2. Will competency tests be administered only in the English language? If so, are we going to fail repeatedly the millions of students who speak no English or limited English?
3. Will minimum competency testing programs undermine the public's traditional commitment to educational excellence? In other words, how do we prevent the floor from becoming the ceiling?
4. What for our times are the survival or coping skills individuals need to possess? Do minimum competency tests adequately simulate the conditions under which these skills might need to be used? (I wish, parenthetically, to remind us that we live in

a world which has awesome problems related to economic equity among nations, racism, energy, population growth, distribution of foods and manipulation of human behavior through genetic, pharmacological, electronic, and psychological means. Further, we live in a world in which Russia and the United States control 9.5 billion tons of strategic nuclear firepower with intercontinental range, the equivalent destructive force of roughly 20 tons of TNT for every Russian and American man, woman, and child. On this same issue, Alfred Kazin wrote in Esquire, September, 1977:

> Anyone who knows what is going on in our schools knows that the problem is not that students don't read classics (meaning Victorian novels) but that they think the world can't go under, that the world will save itself, that the world is as mechanical and usable as switiching on the lights and the TV set. Students do not realize how much human intelligence may be needed to save us from the catastrophes that our too practical intelligence has inflicted on us. Our world is so full of social diseases--environmental cancer, nuclear leaks and possible explosions, violent collisions and, above, all, wars, in an unending chain--that it should be the first task of intelligence at least to confront these horrors.

5. How will minimum competency tests affect education of the handicapped, for example, students who are mentally retarded?
6. What educational provisions are being made for students who fail minimum competency tests, even after "remediation"? On the other hand, what educational provisions are being made for students who pass competency tests with ease?

Initially I indicated the strong support, as determined by Gallup Polls, that citizens gave public education from 1969 to 1974. But I also said that a decade of criticism has precipitated a waning of confidence in the schools. Data gathered between March and August, 1976, for a study commissioned by the National Institute of Education showed that the demand for nonpublic schools had taken a "decided upturn" during the preceding five years, the cardinal reason being "disenchantment with the public schools" because of such issues as drug abuse, loose discipline, sex education, controversial books, and lack of academic rigor. (Recent Enrollment Trends in U.S. Nonpublic Schools: Final Report to the National Institute of Education, NIE, 1977).

I believe it imperative to the health of the society that educators intervene before public support of education further erodes. Last April I attended a conference at which a professor from a college in Connecticut said that research he was conducting showed attitudes toward public education to be dependent upon citizens' degree of involvement in the schools: the most harsh critics, he discovered, were persons without children in public school; those with youngsters in school were supportive of the educational system but not so supportive as those actively engaged in such groups as the PTA. This year 37 percent of those participating in the Gallup Poll rated the schools A or B in quality, a drop of 9 percent since 1974. But of those polled who had children enrolled in public schools, 54 percent rated the schools A or B, an increase of 4 percent over last year. The lesson I think is clear: if those of us in

the humanities wish them preserved in public education, we must solicit the active participation of citizens not just in decisions affecting the curriculum of our local schools but in the programs we sponsor and the positions we adopt through professional subject-matter associations. Moreover, we need to take our concerns to the public by participating more actively in community affairs and by communicating more frequently--and let us hope more effectively--with local and state legislators and with representatives of the media.

There still remains in this nation more than a residue of faith in public education as the primary institution for ameliorating the society, and there continues to be more than a smattering of good will toward, and confidence in, teachers. But the time is now critical for us to fortify that faith and augment that good will before shortsighted proponents of the basics strip our subject of its most human and humane components, before they convince the majority of citizens, taxpayers, voters, and parents that teachers of English, rather than being one with them, are a breed apart.